

COYOTE TALES

as told by Joseph Bruchac
illustrated by Patrick Rolo and Topaz Jones



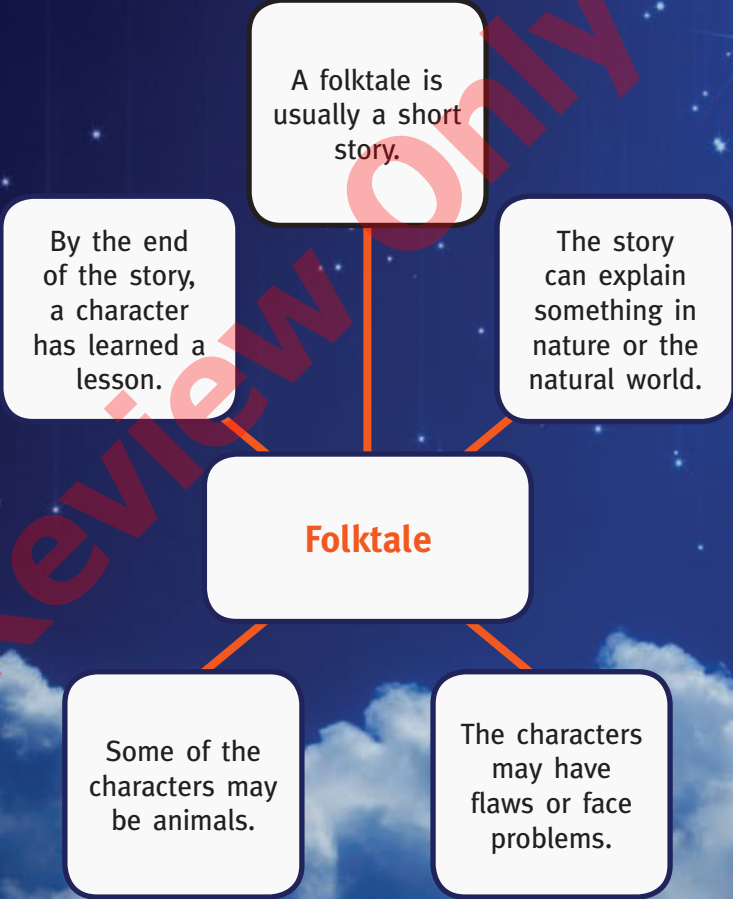
FOLKTALE
LITERATURE

Level **Q/40**
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The two folktales retold in this book are from Native American tribes the Lakota and the Nez Perce.

Folktale

Look for the genre features noted below as you read this book. Use the features to help you understand the text.



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The Trickster Returns

Stories about the trickster Coyote are told by dozens of Native American nations. From all over the United States, Coyote appears as a favorite character in Native American oral traditions.

These two traditional tales show Coyote's many personalities. The first is from the Lakota, Sioux people of the Great Plains, and the second is from the Niimiipu, or Nez Perce people, of the Northwest.



Sometimes Coyote is a foolish being thinking of himself only, as in the first Lakota tale in this book, “Coyote Goes to the Dance.” Here he’s greedy, unreliable, and untrustworthy—too smart for his own good. He tries to deceive others but ends up fooling himself instead! In stories such as this, Coyote shows us how not to behave. The message is to NOT be like Coyote. Otherwise, like Coyote, a person may suffer the consequences.

There are also stories, such as the Nez Perce tale “Coyote and the Swallowing Hill,” in which Coyote plays a different role. Although still a trickster, he doesn’t do foolish things. He uses his trickster powers to help others. In such tales, he may defeat monsters and rescue people and animals.

Coyote stories are often used to explain how things came to be. “Coyote and the Swallowing Hill” tells how a hill appeared. Some say the hill is located on the Colville Reservation in Washington State, where many Nez Perce still live.

Whether Coyote is being greedy or helpful, he is always a trickster. The stories told about him serve two purposes central to all Native American traditional tales—to entertain their audiences and to teach useful lessons.

The fact that Coyote’s stories are so entertaining makes it more likely that the lessons will be remembered. That is why stories about Coyote have long been such great tools for teaching in the Native American storytelling tradition.

Coyote

Goes to the

Dance



Coyote was out walking on the prairie. He was feeling bored.

“I wish I could find something to do,” he whined. “And I’m hungry, too.”

That was certainly true. Coyote was so skinny that his ribs were showing through his scruffy fur.

Then, as he went over a little hill, he began to hear something. It was the sound of a drum and voices singing.

“Oh!” Coyote said. “Someone is having a dance. I like to dance.”

He looked around trying to find the source of the drum and the singing. But all he could see around him was the wide prairie. Where were the sounds coming from? The ones singing were singing well, even though their voices were very high and shrill.

Coyote looked in front of him and in back of him.

He looked to one side and the other.

He looked up.

Then he looked down. There he saw an old skull of a bison. The sound was coming from inside the hollow skull.



Coyote bent down to look.

Inside that bison skull was a whole tribe of little field mice. Some of them were beating on a small drum, with drumsticks made of twigs. Others were shaking tiny rattles, as they danced in a circle. They were all happily singing a mouse powwow song:

Yah, whey hi yah, yah whey hi yah

Yah, whey hi yah, whey yah hi hiyo

Those mice seemed to be having a wonderful time as they danced in that circle around the drum.

That looks like so much fun, Coyote thought. And those mice look delicious. I could dance, and then it would be time to eat.

“Hey,” Coyote said, “you mice!”

The field mice stopped drumming and dancing. They looked up and saw one of Coyote’s big yellow eyes staring in at them. They were not happy to see that. They knew that Coyote liked to eat field mice.

“Can I join in?” Coyote said. “I’m a great singer, and I love to dance.”

Field Mouse Chief motioned his people to stay where they were. If they ran out to try to escape, they might be caught and eaten.

Then he stepped forward.

“That might not be a good idea, Coyote,” Field Mouse Chief said in a nervous voice. “You are very big, and we are very small. There may not be enough room in here for you.”

Coyote did not listen. He wanted to dance, and he was also getting hungrier.



“I am sure I can fit in there,” he said. “Can I come in?”

“All right, Coyote,” Field Mouse Chief said. “You can try to join us.”

Field Mouse Chief pointed with his nose off to his left. “Try to come in through our door.”

The door was a big hole at the end of the skull. Coyote stuck his long nose into that hole. His nose fit in with no trouble.

“See,” Coyote said, “I can fit inside.”

But now it was not so easy. Coyote had to push to get more of his head through the hole. He pushed and pushed as hard as he could.

“Keep trying, Coyote,” Field Mouse Chief said as he motioned for his people to start leaving. “You’re almost in.”

Coyote pushed even harder.

Then—*POP!*—his whole head was inside the skull.

“I’m here!” Coyote said. “Where’s the dancing?”

He looked around. The drum and all of the field mice were gone. As soon as Coyote’s head was inside, they’d run away.